

# FIELD





# FIELD

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THRESHOLD OF THE OBLIVIOUS BLOSSOMING

When I said one blossom desires the air,  
Another the shadows, I was free  
Of desires. Beyond the doorsill the café tables

Were empty because it was raining.  
The rain was empty as well, & there was no poignancy

Left in it when I looked up at it falling, & went on  
Sitting inside & waiting for my dealer to show up so I could buy  
Two grams of crystal methedrine from her, talk for a moment,

And finish my coffee.

When I thought of the petals of the magnolia blossom  
Flattened by passing traffic to the pavement & the gradual  
Discoloration of them, their white like that of communion dresses

Becoming gray & a darker gray moment by moment,  
When I knew I wanted them to mean nothing

And suggest everything, desire rushed back into things,  
But not into the blossoms & not into the air.

THE GOOD PIG

Might have been the books we read as children,  
our confusion about human protocol. Who calls whom.

What to do now, etc. All those animals dressed  
in human clothes. The kid with the animal snout and

beaver teeth, fur all over his body but dressed  
in blue overalls. Droopy donkey and humming

fat bear. Everybody chatting one to the other.  
Bad bunny; jealous bear sister. Maybe

it was the chamomile in B. Potter's books.  
Something about McGregor. We picked up

some odd ideas. About getting caught  
under the flower pot. Losing your shoes.

Leaving your coat behind on the fence.  
One reasonable lesson after the other and everything

ending well. Don't lie down in that bed.  
Don't eat that porridge. Don't knock on that door.

In the story, supper gets delivered to the table.  
You were bad and you were almost eaten

but there you are at last in the little burrow  
with the fires burning. A bit of fur missing.

Some shame. Mother, however,  
seems to have forgiven you.

Or let's say, your house blown down,  
but the wolf's in the pot. Everybody huddling

in the smartest pig's house. The good pig.  
And out the window, Thomas the Train passing by.

Smile on his face. Always pleasant.  
Some furry hands waving from the windows.

TABLEAUX VIVANTS

1. *The Living Room*

“Charlotte Corday,” Paul Jacques Aimé Baudre, 1860

Mannequin-still, his body  
stretches the sofa’s narrow length.  
A dying man. A bathtub.

Its water twilled rust-red.

Scrap of green throw blanketing  
his feet. Her feet won’t work.

She should help or leave or—

Backlit, the door’s shadow is  
a knife-hilt blackening

his chest. His papers, rivered  
milk, spill. The map on the wall

is mere ornament, out of date:  
nothing is where it used to be.

All drift and float.

Where there used to be land, only water.  
Where there used to be water, no escape.

## 2. *The Backyard*

"Laocoön and His Sons," 25 BC

Her children and their father rake  
the grass smooth. A matched  
set, the children bracket him.

Witness the fury of the disinterred:

ground bees knot burred ropes  
about their feet and cord their legs.

Children carry within their parents'  
sins, diseased. Pain plaits each face.

Her son's eyes on his father's.

What blue venom binds these  
three, what grief will time unleash?

Then the bellow that breaks  
the skies just before they scatter  
like woodchips beneath the ax.

## 3. *The Driveway*

"The Birth of Venus," Sandro Botticelli, 1486

And so it was that she emerged.

Single contrapposto figure caught  
on the verge of stepping forth,

of becoming—



Not labor's long-troughing waves,  
nor the journey of feet on shore,

but the instant just before.

Stand of pin-oaks, flight of posies,  
and a new violet coat drawn about her.

*To wait* is not the same as inaction.

Soon enough the wind will bend  
the cattail reeds, soon enough

she will fasten herself to the light.

## THE WEDDING AT CANA

This was the first sign—  
how her husband could tilt

the earthen jug  
and the wine would flow red  
as a liar's tongue.

\*

There is always enough  
—the bottle need never empty—  
A blind man, he bends to  
the closet's dark recess, reaching.

Faith is strict, insists on its blood  
sacrifice—the liver, the heart,  
the organ plying its warm, ruddy  
tones—the ever-swelling hymn.

This is how one makes water  
into wine—

\*

Discards chime in the recycling bin.  
She listens to the wind.

Rain of emptied glass, its pour,  
when she opens the attic scuttle door.

At the liquor store, the clerk can  
greet her three-year-old girl by name.

\*

This was the first miracle—  
Veronese gives us Christ,  
expressionless, a man  
in a stupor. The wedding guests  
frown, eyes lost—mourning—

Above Christ, a man butchers  
the lamb, cleaver  
stilled in the second before  
its descent. Always

he must suffer this. The drawn knife,  
always just above his head.

SPECULATION ON CAUSE AND EFFECT

The main character,  
Born in a funeral home,  
Lives at the raveled edge of an empire,

A paradise, of sorts,  
She tends with ax-blows.  
On the general store shelves:

A bolt of calico, a sack of flour,  
Eleven kinds of penny-candy.  
She has ten pennies.

After the exhumation,  
She climbs down in the hole  
And watches the constellations turn.

The moon, fed nothing,  
Is plump nonetheless,  
Stomach distended.

One of the stars, out of line  
(*That one, she thinks. No, that one.*)  
Will set the story in motion.

UKIYO-E

The baby must be fresh,  
the eye a hall of mirrors.  
Stuff the mouth full of wanting.  
Gently lower your baby into the ink.  
Sink the silhouette into an undulating field.

*A small black shape approaches you.  
Strange rhythm.*

Try to imagine building a particular world,  
for such a shape.

*I never planned on capturing you.*

Follow the lines on paper,  
affix the baby onto a wooden block.  
You could print thousands of babies,

miles and miles of babies—

*You were my first work  
before going home,  
before the dance had ended.*



*Mary Ann Samyn*

NOW WE ARE ALLOWED

The teacups of the dogwood open—a tenderness—and the clouds  
line up in pinks and blues.

I put my head on your shoulder, best afternoons; best evenings, you  
lay your cheek along my breast to tell the story.

*Bang bang, bang bang*: what you said, and the feeling, also, the  
logic—same as your body, all of it, against all of mine.

Effortlessness seems true; generosity, the existence of the world.

This is wisdom—that solitude—which also joins me to you.

## MAY I SIT?

The rope of the flag hits the pole: a sound out of memory.

The important thing is not the exact form of the wish but its feeling.

Earlier yearnings weren't helpful; I could have let them.

Hot afternoons I climbed what there was to climb. The soul, mostly.

A sloping lawn recalls the library of girlhood, some belonging.

To tell it now is to be listened to; happiness might be our right.

The bee that made its way inside and back out convinces me.

## THAT MORNING'S DOE

Fullness of spring. I had been keeping something safe. What was it?

The boy with the dandelion tucked in his ear understands *later*.

He is a child, but not just one.

As always, birds go on ahead. Their neutrality feels kind to me.

Intuition too is calm in its disclosures.

A hard winter is commonplace; we all lived through.

When the doe appeared, I had been needing a spiritual question.

Love was what I settled on.

YOU'RE BACK

1.

You went away and they went on  
without you. When you reappeared  
with kids and an ironic beard  
the ticket carousel was full.  
They'd finally stopped taking orders  
from east of Dougal and redrawn  
the map's eccentric ballpoint borders.  
The dough hook dervished in its bowl.

Home is where your references  
aren't recognized, or needed—when you  
have to go back they have to clock you in.  
The only other differences  
were little changes to the menu.  
Nobody asked you where you'd been.

2.

Your daughter didn't have a single friend  
named Stephanie, in soccer or at school.  
Nobody screamed the name at either end  
of the public pool.

And you began to understand, and mourn,  
that there would have to be a great-grandmother  
named Stephanie before there could be another  
Stephanie born.

And the three Stephanies who gave the name  
its amplitude, the Stephanies of myth,  
kept showing up at Kroger and became  
the Stephanies you went to high school with.

3.

You went away and they went on  
like that, as though you hadn't gone,  
still doing it the way they'd learned  
to do it and that only they  
still do it and the only way  
as far as they're concerned.  
Then you came back and said I knew it,  
and told them you were unaware  
of anybody anywhere  
still doing it the way they do it,  
and they said you don't say.

4.

Only your first-grade teacher looked the same—  
uncannily, because it was her daughter.  
She had the makeup and had kept the name.  
She even had the belly you could rub  
for good luck when she brought you in to sub.  
And she had plans to finish out the year,  
but you'd been through this once before; her water  
would break at recess and she'd disappear  
for 30 years and you'd be back like Kotter,

back to the blackboard, suddenly unsure  
of how best to distinguish *your* from *you're*:  
You're back, and bigger; better watch your back.  
Don't strain it sipping from those tiny fountains.  
You're sad because your blackboard isn't black.  
You're teaching them your harmlessly subversive  
verse/choruses to "Cielito Lindo"  
and other lovely, useless things, like cursive.  
You're staring out your modular's one window,  
turning the thunderheads to thundermountains.



EVERY GIRL IS AN EXPERIMENTAL GIRL

In Sun Bank lobby the palest girl knits  
a heavy blue thing. You could say nature is winning.

She knows seven palms and seven people  
in the city where an alligator is a grocery cart.

Coming back, she'd wanted lichen in her lobby, expected green  
snakes, vines. Not swarms of black plastic cords connected to her  
lost-left world.

For a girl, a vine is a telephone line. Not a noose, not a monster, not  
a lasso.

Any girl will still grow in darkness.

This evening a squirrel swings like swag in the jaws of a bobcat  
behind See Saw Junction. (Could a girl be dead *in a mouth* and be  
okay?)

She never made a war, a complete sock, a sound, a daughter, a box,  
a belonging. She misses herself then. She misses herself now.

Translucent buttons in the school desk drawer in the basement. The  
pewter pitcher  
from her mother. The clippers! Every night, another thing she  
forgot, cannot forget.

There weren't hopes or cranes or lenders here, not back then. There  
were parents.

She's come from far away but not far away enough. Remember

a girl becoming a red bicycle (she *flew* red) followed her father—  
he knew—down the concrete water by the bay?

CAPSULE

So the jazzman died  
living in a box  
and his music just left  
the solar system  
with Moby Dick  
and baseball stats,  
Adam and Eve abstracted  
beyond recognition.  
And on earth  
things are as ever:  
a man and a woman  
go for a drive.  
The night is warm.  
A bird blows in.  
They crash, climb free  
of all that's upside-down,  
un-bruised and sober  
and going to make  
serious love, having come  
at last to the beginning  
of their story.

## PALACE OF ILLUSION

*for Rusty Levenson*

I take a sledge to the bust of Berkeley,  
a box cutter to half a dozen portraits  
of empiricists in important wigs.  
I open a water main and wash away  
the treasures of ancient Japan.  
I pull all the fake Franz Klines off the wall.  
The real ones are hiding behind them.  
These I set on fire but the fakes are so good  
the flames jump indifferently between,  
hopelessly in love with either.  
I touch my lighter to some mohair braids  
and the Rare Dolls Room goes up  
like a foundling home in a Russian photo.  
Now the lighter's a bat. Those stupid eggs explode  
in a universe of pink and purple stars.  
I shoot the picture of Lincoln, pistol-whip  
the unresisting Buddha, kick a Boucher  
in the ass, my boots crunching over breadcrumbs  
of marble and though splinters of gilded frame.  
But I pause at an Annunciation, the usual girl  
and angel, the lily in a vase, the dove  
in hesitation. Plus a couple of buntings  
in a silver cage, some chickens looking ruffled  
and incensed, just run from the barn to the house  
through the worst hailstorm in memory.  
I let my ax go limp, banish from my mind  
the rise and fall of Rome, the room-filling  
abstractions just begging to be bombed.  
I stoop and start sweeping the floor  
with my hands. I build a little pyramid  
of soot, the feast of an ash-fed flower.  
I do not wonder that God's messenger  
should cluck at what I do, that the lily  
should nod in my direction.

WRITE

*after Inger Christiansen ("I write like water")*

Write like the water  
rising in the reservoir inlet  
during a week of steady rainfall,  
the boardwalk past ankle-deep.

Write like the car  
still idling down the street,  
the driver keeping herself warm,  
unable to make up her mind.

Write like the tornado  
leveling the living room  
and filling the window well  
with recognizable debris.

Write like the elevator  
opening its door to no one  
and then waiting long enough  
for that passenger to get in.

## THE COMMISSIONER OF DREAD

There's this chance you'll come home one afternoon  
to find a rabid raccoon on your steps.  
Don't think of scaring it. Don't think.

You won't always avoid whatever's deadly—  
tornados, viruses, infernos, venoms, radioactivity,  
fumes, thinking too much or too little.

When conscripted, your children will learn  
that quiet weapons work best, silent ones so automatic  
soldiers needn't give thinking a thought.

Everyone knows there's something out there  
about to become visible to our telescopes.  
It doesn't think. It doesn't have to.



THE DAY AN OFFICER SHOWS UP WHO LOOKS  
EXACTLY LIKE THE ACTOR GARY OLDMAN

Not when he played a one-eyed pimp  
with a gold grille, long opaque nails,

and a scythe scarred around his cheekbone.  
Not the gay playwright done in by his lover.

Not the crooked cop in a white suit who blasts  
through an apartment door and everyone

inside as he listens to Moonlight Sonata. No,  
I'm talking about the one where he plays

Beethoven opposite Isabella Rossellini,  
and the bombs fall as his hearing slips

like an unmoored boat, and anguish distorts  
his features as he spends the rest of his life

composing under water. He's the one  
knocking on the front door as the toast

sticks in my throat and I list all the things  
I wouldn't want for him to tell me, weighing

the chances he's only come to ask  
for a donation. When I return again

and again to that morning the grief  
split my world into a triptych: before

and after and the heart stop in between,  
it's a different face that glides the waves

and opens the door to greet him—  
the petite blonde with the high

ass he's hired out to a bachelor party,  
the rich patron he owes everything, the man

who watches him sleep at night, the child  
who witnessed his crime, or the woman

he's loved in secret his whole life.

POEM TO FOLD INTO A PAPER BOAT

Because we're not supposed to write about the weather,  
even though it won't stop raining since we broke everything

and the porch grows viridian moss, and the backyard ferns  
could fatten a dinosaur, nodding its plated head

beside the swingset. Forget about love—never mind  
your wife who is forty and dark eyed, who keeps your secrets

and drinks with you sometimes, who still after ten years  
and two children sighs when you bite, gently, her earlobe.

Nobody cares. Everyone's five-year-old breathes  
by the bed at night, everyone's walls are haunted by bats,

everyone's world is ending—can't you please just shut up  
for a minute? Can't you please just give it a rest?

But no—there you are again on the riverbank.  
Fat moon in the clouds. Little flotilla bobbing downstream.

## WHEN I DIE

walking home from the library, I think why here  
outside Schofield Hall, where some fucking associate dean  
will find me, do a little panic dance in his tassel-loafers?

No one around, just a few bees, just a few day-lilies  
blowing their bright cornets, the concrete walkway  
rough and cool against my cheek. Humid for June,

the rain just stopped, pale levitations of steam  
from the parking lot—even dead, I can't shut up  
about the weather. And so many questions—

after the heart stops, how long before the shades  
roll down forever? Ten seconds? Two?  
Before that last ringing note in your head crescendos,

then fades? What's next? And what will they find  
on my laptop? What should I have said to my children,  
my wife? Sorry! I loved you. Better luck next time?

I rise through the trees, look down from the steep  
steel roof of the new student union. A small crowd,  
my body—Jesus, I'm fat. Somehow I'm missing a shoe.

Ambulance parked on the wet grass. Two paramedics  
pumping my chest. They stop, shake their heads.  
Clouds in the river. Cars crossing the bridge...

## THE PAST

It bathes in your shadow.  
It lies down in the book  
as you read. Warm nights,

it waltzes the drapes—  
cicada-grind in the treetops,  
the window's violet

mouthful of sky.  
When you dress  
it stares out from the mirror,

stands in the closet  
between your pressed clothes.  
When you sleep, it writes

in your journal—  
*come back, come back*  
at the top of each page.

LILAC HORSES

Short horses are mules who still do some work  
but ATV's have taken over the business of most

of what the horses used to do. Horses are now  
long-legged cows hanging out by the edge

of the road looking over the edge of the fence  
not quite knowing if they're being kept out

or kept in. I haven't touched a horse in so long.  
Not since my great grandmother died and the farmer

behind her fence let us feed apples to the horses  
who aren't there at all anymore.

The horses,  
the apples, the farm.

And then I walk toward the horses.  
I finally stop driving away from them

I finally stop thinking of them as cows on  
the way to the Purina factory by my house

but instead as carriers of dust and seed and tall  
men. I find an apple in the bottom of my purse

and although I am still afraid of big teeth and broken  
wrists that don't allow me to get any work done

on the back of an ATV as I ride out into the canyons  
where those broken cows work their way into a cave

and can't find their way out, I hold the apple  
forward and say, not that you'd do better, horse,

but at least when you're stuck in a canyon without water  
you have the good grace to imprint yourself on canyon walls.

Make pictographs of your once-there'd-ness  
even if you have already become smaller than you were.



Further  
You go

Emptier it gets  
Salt, desert

Mountain, dirt;  
A time back, at  
Another poet's

Birthday  
While I served myself

Yesterday's  
Old ragù  
Some poser with his  
Idiotic wife  
Arrived and saw

I was alone  
*You*

*Take a walk*, he said, then  
Offered me his  
Arm

Over the grass  
To the folly we went, over the waves

To colossal weather  
To snow and blood  
Lakes abhorrent and dense with phosphate

Ice on the lintel  
On the thick  
Black drainpipe

Ice on the sweltering compost heap;  
Each object's edge  
Lies

Somewhere beyond where we think it  
None knows so none can tell you  
If island and shelf  
Are one, or one and two

LEARNING TO SWIM IN THE PUBLIC POOL

*to our son John*

You died, a few days old, in an isolette,  
but all your supposed childhood, I take you

out & concentrate until you flicker  
briefly in specifics. I take you out

cold-water days, acid-rock radio or  
country music drained away by wind,

& coax you, your body only imagined  
blue & pimply as fresh stucco,

coax you into congruence with water.  
Unable to absorb the art by absorbing

the medium itself (the first lesson),  
you choke on the water & go down

until your eyes rub darkness,  
your ears fill, bubbles thread up

out of every body-opening that squints  
to hold you. After a while, your eyes

won't close on the grainy overhead  
sunlight through which adult legs kick,

through which their careless hands  
slash. Up here, we have 5 PM's caramelized

light. Up here, dry & clothed, we argue  
dinner. Up here, other kids queue

along the pool's nicked edge, all profile  
like figures in an Egyptian frieze.

Pushing between them, your mother  
kneels, wets her lips to whisper down

into the water that Putin will free  
the dissidents. Up here, I promise

hot-dogs. Up here, the tired lifeguard's  
hiccups thin to breathing. The hardest

lesson is to want to come up again.

## THE LAST JUDGMENT

Under the Sistine Chapel roof, God dried  
before Michelangelo could define him

with sin's alizarins & chalky blues.  
Above the altar, the bad dead

wait more patiently than the good.  
The art of it forces us to cramp

back our necks more, guilty of something  
we aren't allowed to know

here below, elbows in, body-surfing  
the tourist crowds in Rome's worst July.

Then, it's noon & the Pope's cops shoo  
all of us back too early through

the vestment museum, the chained-off  
satellite chapels, driving us

deprived of our yearning,  
down the 16<sup>th</sup> century small-person stairs.

Because even religion must eat lunch,  
we are driven out of heaven—

*chiuso* to Lutherans, AIDS victims,  
single mothers & Nazis. *Chiuso*

to the lumpish, dark-skinned woman  
in a sari, its saffron coating

the slick last stairs Loretta & I help  
her down—*closed*, the guard insists

in English—all of us pushed out  
into the Viale Vaticano's rainy

dead-end, tourists.

FOR EMILY HENOCHOWICZ, AFTER  
THE TEAR GAS CANISTER

they gave us three weeks  
for Pesach enough time see beyond

the wall I didn't see them  
firing trying to find out where

coming from it must have been  
close / no time between

seeing it & it landing for you to see  
where it was coming from

in the face / a little crunch  
I had always been fussy

about my eyes always  
observing things & drawing what

I'm observing / I'm observing  
you only need one eye



IMAGO DEI

Nail parings, tooth bits, rubbed eyelashes, blood—  
what if over the broken bedstead of the past

there hovers for each of us an effigy  
made from all the parts we let go,

the shot sparrows of ourselves, lost pages,  
beetle-eaten leaves? Some nights

the world is a banging shutter  
or a dream of crows scraping the sky,

some nights a tape measure coiled  
and sleeping in a drawer.

What if along the road, in a truck's tailwind  
you found a black stone with a white

quartz cross embedded within?  
Surely, it would it be a sin to want back

all the skin we've shed,  
holding on when all instructions say, *Let go—*

of these shards, these shadowy parts,  
scars and wounds,

till they're gathered up  
into a kind of angel-other,

all particle and wave, moving  
like metal shavings toward

some great magnet whose force  
is invisible until it inhabits us.

WALT'S

I stopped for peaches at the bridge but no one  
was there since it was ten at night and it was  
dark underneath the trees and there were two  
wagon-loads and a cash box and a scale  
but no one had indicated the price though there were  
plastic bags and my hands were shaking when I  
put the money in the box. I made it  
a dollar a pound but that was too low for peaches  
like that and I had already stopped  
on the bridge with my motor running to look down  
at the river and it was too late to go back and how  
could I explain it, say, to a twenty-year-old  
with a strap underneath his chin and the sickening lights  
going on and off and how in the world does it  
compare anyway to Moses taking the law  
into his own hands and murdering the Egyptian?

## SANTIAGO

So much for owning your own limousine  
and running around to open the door  
and wearing a short oh green and blossoming necktie  
they always wore in the panic they called a Panic  
where things were things nor was it even a *thing*—  
that limousine—though my car was a green  
fifteen-year-old Buick, a strip on the windshield  
and two broken springs in the back for passengers  
and no necktie anywhere not to mention  
a hat with a bill or a hat with a turkey feather  
or a screaming turkey under my arm, a thing  
if I ever saw one, brown and obtrusive, with  
a blood-filled wattle and legs that scratched  
and wings that had amazing body—just  
a thought passing the 1939 World's Fair on  
my way to Kennedy my first stop for Santiago.

## OAXACA

Call it the bus they used to carry workers  
and thieves alike both going to work or God  
knows what or ten hands reaching down to pull you  
up so you could hang on to the slats  
and feel your upper teeth going into your brain  
as first you slowed going up to give the gears  
a chance to find the grooves then shaking  
as they dropped into third though there was a strong  
smell of sweat—and urine—in it, given how  
you were crowded together, your leather suitcase  
taking up too much room, the next hill  
shaped like a parrot, the color  
the color of bamboo, that perfect orange going  
into yellow and leaving red, another bus  
just behind you, shaking and groaning, finding  
every hole, the thieves and workers it seems  
jumping together, no one falling, though who was  
bleeding or screaming I can't remember, it being  
the year a Wilson was one of the Secretaries  
and he had a hat made out of paper money  
fifty dollars with President Grant on one side  
looking as if he were walking in his sleep  
in Riverside Park, near his tomb, I saw him  
several times, I know it's hard to believe,  
two thousand miles north of the flowering hills.

## AFTER THE CHURCH READING AGAINST THE WAR

It was Galway kept talking about the sidewalk  
and how it was made of stone and not cement  
and what a great wonder it was to him,  
but there was old snow piled up and I had to  
walk in the street against the cars mostly  
speeding cabs and I would have stood my ground  
if someone there didn't pull me away although  
what I remember I jumped over a barrier—  
I sort of flew—and my pride knew no  
bounds but at the restaurant I was too quiet  
and maybe they thought I hurt my back or I was  
thinking of death but I had probably  
zeroed in on nothing which no one can stand;

and it was such a pleasure driving home  
with the window open and the smell of  
winter on route 78 and thinking  
again of Galway and his stone sidewalk  
and how I flew and how a bird ascends  
at the last minute just to tease you, especially  
crows, especially pigeons—and sparrows—so hungry  
they stay for the bread and only when you reach down  
do they go for the blue, and though it wasn't blue that night  
but black, with snowflakes falling on your eyelids,  
and though you did the bread later you flew  
first over a red plastic fence, then over a wooden  
and if there was only a starter wind to lift you  
you might have never stopped flying, you might have *risen*.

BROKEN PROMISES

As in a field tiny carrots stubbled  
lettuce pounds  
of life.

In my knee a gleaning of whole  
moments without  
pain.

And always the click of deer at night  
through the stream out  
to Hen Island.

Their hips fluent as water as  
the turn of the hawk's red wing floating  
to the pine above me.

## VOICE

For every blade of river I give you  
myself,  
low slopes gathering for warmth,

the falcon thumping through a gull crystals  
in the bark of scrub pines as  
storms sift in,

I fly straight up from my shameless beaten  
body straight  
up from myself, from the bottom of this river.

Unfurled. Skyless. Never looking down.



THE SEER DREAMS HELEN

Forbid her the jackfruit: she'll conceal it in her pillowcase, a magnet  
to divert compasses under the table.

She will choose the comely words  
over the honest ones; the mirror of her beauty

makes a meal of men.

Even now, vanity eavesdrops on her,

and the bird's softest landing  
splits boulders.

The boys arrive to board up the river;  
how you defend your sons against her is unclear.

Leave her alone: hope it whittles her.

Forbid her loneliness: it short-circuits the stars.

EVERYDAY POEM

I

Land surveyed, glad to be done with that job,  
exactly the right activity.  
Someone thinks like a Prussian,  
punishes his wife, the kids.  
She removes her earring  
when he takes her measure,  
who's had practice doing so.  
Feelings enter poems—  
a bit of illumination like a short sentence.  
A man's alive whenever  
he counts his colored shirts.  
Garbed he moves  
through the sunny rooms  
and does what he wants  
in his corner.

II

Washing hands more and more often.  
Before the mirror I lose hairs,  
comb my guilt forward  
like a hairdo  
and stand there and let stand,  
changing nothing at all.  
Nothing means more  
than my possessions.  
A lot of stuff for verses  
is lying around.  
I collect hats, dumb-bells  
and carry fruit around  
and flowers and the neighborhood  
breathes a sigh of relief whenever  
I finally get my fingers dry.

### III

Everything as simple as possible. Of course  
the river at hand flows  
straight ahead, past windows  
folks push open mornings,  
air does such good.  
The river-wind blows into your shirt,  
snappy life, tomorrow, going up your pants.  
The day grows slowly in your muscles.  
Water's misting up from the banks below.  
Curtains fly quietly into the room,  
in which there's still night, surplus albumen,  
sweat sketched in the pillow.  
Of course  
that all gets lost. The light  
visits every object now.

### IV

That makes sense—  
days of the week, thrifty weather,  
six times breakfast  
just like that, with swallowed spit.  
Tuesday and Thursday don't blush.  
That makes sense.  
Water rocks in the glass  
if you're not looking.  
In front of a wall  
you take a breath  
absent any grace,  
feel your flesh through your pockets.  
Your suit keeps you upright  
for the pretty flower  
in your buttonhole.

*translated by Stuart Frieibert*

I HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE EROTIC HISTORY OF MUSK

Those red, jellied secretions from the guts  
of East Asian deer

make the base notes in many  
perfumes labeled *musk*. What I learned next

shivered from a scent  
to a bleat as I read that ancient

shepherds first discovered the scent  
of musk from sheep-fucking,

from the pungent fragrance  
released by the animals'

anal glands. And this  
is a problem for me. This

bothers me, even though the vials  
of musk in my medicine

cabinet were brewed  
from synthetic recipes. I don't want

even these bruised  
approximations or the way

a dab of musk under each  
pulsing earlobe calls near

a cornered or kicking animal  
and a cry in which I find myself

on which side of this struggle?  
What did you say

last night when you  
bent near my ear? What

were you coming here for  
if not to dissolve

one time into another, this  
brick house into a Bronze

Age field. The scent of  
that body—ancient—as it yields.

Mark Wagenaar

# APPALACHIAN FAREWELL

*for Charles Wright*

It's sluice & sieve this side of the mountain today,  
it's TNT & hill heave, & a long slide,  
until this side is the other.

Appalachia's a green speck in the eye  
of God, a speck man's been working to remove  
for the past century or two,

but for now it's dust in our teeth,  
it's a missing mountain shoulder  
& a missing vowel in our mouths.

Still, I'd like to see the sluice rise for once,  
& the Flesh drift back to Word,  
if I had words to describe it—debris settling  
on a river's hairpin turn now, the sound of the world falling

back to the world. I'd like to see the coal dust transfigure  
into someone whose name is beyond me  
(dust still high in the sunlight),  
someone too radiant to recognize,  
who will speak when I don't know which side I'm on.

## MIDWEST BLUES LEAVE ME SHINING

Blue streetlight on the snow-limned trees like butaned rocksalt,

on the post office & bar, on the red brick buildings

with plywood lidded over their windows,

& lightless houses with letters nailed

to their doors—

the doors like bulletin boards, making demands of the missing—

but the flesh that is kin to light & grass & wing

is nowhere on the smalltown street.

Third poorest county in the U.S., by last measure, by best guess,

but it could be anywhere, it could be a hundred towns in the Midwest

with two places open, & neither a grocery store,

where old trucks sit in driveways, heavy enough to bookend

the Book of the Dead, Midwest edition.

And luck's rare as a three-legged cat,

like the one that Higgs bosons its way each evening

through the deer-picked garden

next door, little shadow, little hopalong shadow,

if I didn't have bad luck I'd have no luck at all.

Foxrare like gold dust,

scarce as you, Old Ghost,

as sunshine after sundown, the golden capillaries of a wounded body

we never see, an aortic elsewhere, but one that passes through us—

like rain through the earth, through the ribs of the dead,

this unseen body

body of muons & neutrinos, Old Ghost, someday

the wounds will put our doubts to rest.



And someday the rooms will be prepared, Lord—  
the numbers have already been made for us, or so it's written  
on our Social Security cards—but there are other numbers too,  
created just for us,  
arrest & case numbers, horsepower & BAC, pink slip & toe tag.

Hard living, Lord, hard living,  
as close to the bone as far from grace,  
if & when we can find it.

Till then it's mobile meth labs in the back of pickup trucks,  
or 2 liter Mountain Dew bottles for the chef who prefers to shake n bake.

Till then it's old boots & cornmash, & an evening made for six strings,  
& a hollow heart,  
blues come scrub me, come leave me shining  
like prairie grasses.

Till then the King of the Ghosts is the rabbit bayed first,  
who staggers from the muzzle  
clutching its own foot for luck,  
& leaves no prints nor blood in the new snow.

THE WOMAN WHO WORKS IN THE MEDICAL SUPPLY  
STORE IS STRANGE. SO IS A DETECTIVE.

An envelope only for keys  
Came with the job.  
The store is pre-fab,  
Unvaried. Not operatic.  
Shelves have flags and arrows  
Pointing to needs. Unguents,  
Capes, medicinal forevers.  
Autopsies planted at birth.

A phone call about a customer's prosthesis:  
"Could she be hiding  
Her real arm behind her back  
Like Lon Chaney?"  
The caller is a detective.  
Deals in flagrant  
Disclosures, theaters of morals.  
His storefront has a window  
With two dolls in bed. A third doll,  
With magnifying glass,  
Pokes out from under. A happy  
Family.

The Medical Supply Store magnifies  
Night. But gauze denies it.  
A single crutch leans into a corner  
Like a fallen branch into the crotch  
Of its father.

## UNFORMED PERSONALITY DISORDER (UPD)

Tina never twigged that social skills must be taught  
Sooner than tap or kickball.

The teacher who said "If you don't ask a boy to dance,  
You're going to the principal's office" didn't twig, either.

Satan needed a sanctum and chose the gym locker room,  
With girl devils that specialized in ridicule of the specific.

Tina's career has varied. On Silk Street  
She was nearly flattened. By distraction and lorry.

For a time, she bored or discomfited many people, Serially.  
For a time, she admired the Amish. And their apparent rules.

The trick, if there is one, isn't to "see yourself as others  
See you." It is to see others.

She learned from Frank O'Hara in an astonished poem  
That he, too, was a child pariah.

Two deer come to the lawn. Their legal address is the woods.  
One of them is probably Frank.

FEEDING THE HORSES

Tonight I've come out in my sock feet, dogs barking behind,  
echoing threats against the night-spirits. Without thinking  
I bark back, our habit toward each other. Our dark barn's  
been off the grid for years, like me. Sometimes I'm a loud,  
pedantic fool, but can only love myself regardless.  
The lantern hisses and pops to life in its lacy mantle:  
one, two, or three tentative thumb-clicks, then a whoosh.  
I love the country dangers—holding firmly to my chainsaw,  
that scarred old sociopath, for instance—such that it feels  
my heart has hands on it, and my brain's the buzzing engine  
aiming not to lop a leg off. How can it be so enraged  
at wood? Or these horses, who've been known to buck  
and kick and bite, though most often they are star-eyed  
and sensual, making horse-angels in the sandy loam  
after we have hosed them down; beautiful and dangerous  
and loving to eat, and I love the paradise of their eating.

## ONE TO ST. IVES

See these pictures of us when we were so much older.  
You were my actuarial friend: we grew up together  
in the same likelihood. I lived on Start and you The End.  
Let me introduce you to yourself: my graduation  
was your funeral. Why won't we think of it sooner?  
Sooner's much too late. It's been grand predicting the past;  
but oh, when the past remembers us—dead first,  
blown brains out. You knew me as a rising sunset.  
I never knew you at all. Are we there yet? Stranger, come!  
We're about to be unborn. Our fates are inconceivable.

OUR DEMOCRATIC NATION

The pilot  
                    sips his drink.  
The co-pilot, head atilt,  
                                    sleeps.  
In the airplane's cargo hold,  
                                    three rows  
of coffins.  
                    The airplane skims clouds,  
then sinks  
                    through mist  
into black air.  
                    Such distances  
the pilot sees now,  
                                    clear as God.  
He knows  
                    about the storm  
the plane approaches.  
                                    It floats  
like a flickering  
                                    thought  
in the many-minded  
                                    distances.  
In the airplane's belly,  
                                    the dead are content  
to let the pilot  
                                    steer.  
The plane hurries  
                                    through the night  
until the storm  
                                    fills the windows.  
Awake now,  
                                    the co-pilot grips his seat.  
The plane has entered  
                                    the trembling mind of God.

In the airplane's  
                                basement  
the coffins slide  
                                from one wall  
to the other.  
                        Then, they slide back again.  
We always hit the walls  
                                hard.



## TRYING TO FORGET ABOUT YOU

In the distant future,  
every place is either hallway or room.

In the distant future,  
you have been dead for a thousand years.

I wear my people's white uniform  
and tell my destination to the hover car.

The shock of artificial sunlight  
through virtual windows,  
is lovely—  
how it tingles my skin.

In the distant future,  
they upload news to my brain  
so I know what to say about my enemy.

We built such enormous guns on the moon.

On the public screens,  
I watch the glittering missiles  
rise airlessly from the lunar surface.

We bomb the enemy's encampments  
into ash.

Room or hallway, room or hallway—

is all we have in the distant future, our constructions  
crusting over the planet—

and I slip through them  
like a clot through a man  
who doesn't know his time has come.

In the future,  
                                you are never in my thoughts,  
and I love my disastrous country  
                                instead.

Darling, in the future,  
                                you are impossible to remember  
sitting on your sofa with your cat  
reading a book.

                                The way you fasten your white robe  
with the wrong sash,  
then pour yourself another drink  
while the cat licks its paws  
                                is unknown to me.

Some days, I take the elevator to the highest room  
where the actual sun  
                                streams through skylights.

No one goes there anymore,  
the screens long defunct, the furniture of a dead age.

(My people retreated lower and lower,  
digging new rooms into the earth.)

I live in the future the way  
memories live in your mind—

and you inhabit my mind the way  
utopia lives in the machinery of governance.

I wish you could see the enemy's primitive bombs  
explode above our force fields  
                                like the orange chrysanthemums

I watched you worry over  
one specific Sunday morning  
                                ages ago.

## ANGELS IN AMERICA

Mary Szybist, *Incarnadine* (Graywolf Press, 2013)

It's no surprise that one of the great glories of medieval and Renaissance art is the rich tradition of Annunciation paintings, given the inherent drama of the revelation they depict. For Christians, the moment when the archangel Gabriel reveals to Mary that she has been chosen to give birth to the Son of God is a quintessentially sacred subject. Even for nonbelievers, the event is acutely charged with psychological tension, isolating the instant when spirit becomes flesh, when the human encounters the supernatural, when innocence is overtaken by mystery.

The cover of Mary Szybist's second book presents one of the most famous Annunciation paintings, Botticelli's, from the Uffizi in Florence. Gabriel crouches in his flowing pink robes and his parrot-colored wings before Mary, whose body language is highly expressive: her hips turn away, as though to flee, but her torso and face arc back demurely toward the angel, arms reaching out, palms forward, in a gesture both cautionary and welcoming. The drapery and the bodily contortion suggest urgency and agitation, yet both faces are still, contemplative, reverent. The more one looks, the more visionary this highly stylized and iconic composition becomes. In its intimate, enigmatic precision, it's the perfect introduction to Szybist's powerful collection.

Annunciation is quite literally the subject of *Incarnadine*, but not in the way you might expect. Given how ubiquitous ekphrastic poetry is these days, she could predictably have chosen a couple dozen of Annunciation paintings and written descriptively about them. By contrast, what I find most exciting about Szybist's book is how varied and unexpected her approach is, how subtly nuanced: like an adept jazz musician, she explores her theme through multiple key changes and modalities. Nearly a quarter of the poems are titled with some version of the term Annunciation ("Annunciation Under Erasure," "Annunciation in Play," "Annunciation: Eve to Ave," and so on), and many others make reference to it. But the treatments are so surprising, so playful, that new angles and insights keep emerging.

A number of poems present fairly literal versions of the Annunciation, gaining originality from the particular perspective from which it is viewed. One is spoken, improbably enough, by the grass beneath the figures ("how many moments did it hover before we felt // it was like nothing else, it was not bird // light as a mosquito, the aroma of walnut husks // while the girl's knees pressed into us // every spear of us rising, sunlit and coarse"). In the next poem the Holy Spirit itself speaks, zooming vertiginously down from space toward Mary, who is innocently at a garden party ("I fell toward earth's stony colors / until they brightened, until I could see / the green and white stripes of party umbrellas / propped on your daisied lawn. // From above, you looked small / as an afterthought, something lightly brushed in"). And in "Long After the Desert and Donkey," Gabriel speaks directly to Mary in the unmistakable tones of a love poem:

I remember the first time coming toward you,  
how solid you looked, sitting and twisting  
your dark hair against your neck.

But you were not solid.  
From the first moment, when you breathed  
on my single lily, I saw  
where you felt it.

From then on, I wanted to bend low and close  
to the curves of your ear.

There were so many things I wanted to tell you.  
Or rather, I wished to have things that I wanted to tell you.

What a thing, to be with you and have  
no words for it. What a thing,  
to be outcast like that.

In each of these poems, the language is so precise, the psychology so acutely rendered, as to recreate the iconic moment in vividly new terms.



Other poems take a less literal, more elliptical approach. Here, for instance, is the beginning of a prose poem called “Entrances and Exits”:

In the late afternoon, my friend’s daughter walks into my office looking for snacks. She opens the bottom file drawer to take out a bag of rice cakes and a blue carton of rice milk that comes with its own straw. I have been looking at a book of paintings by Duccio. Olivia eats. Bits of puffed rice fall to the carpet.

Nothing could seem more prosaic and less visionary. But the poem is in fourteen sections, divided by considerable white space on the page, and in the second section we find this:

A few hours ago, the 76-year-old woman, missing for two weeks in the wilderness, was found alive at the bottom of a canyon. The men who found her credit ravens. They noticed ravens circling—

It’s similarly straightforward, in the manner of a news report, but the ubiquitous annunciation figures earlier in the book are apt to make us see this encounter between the women and the providential birds as part of the same pattern—it’s an annunciation of a different sort. And the following section confirms it:

Duccio’s *Annunciation* sits open on my desk. The slender angel (dark, green-tipped wings folded behind him) reaches his right hand towards the girl; a vase of lilies sits behind them. But the white dots above the vase don’t look like lilies. They look like the bits of puffed rice scattered under my desk. They look like the white fleck at the top of the painting that means both spirit and bird.

Later in the poem she tells us that “Duccio’s subject is God’s entrance into time: time meaning history, meaning a body.” And the embodiedness of incarnation is very much at the center of the poem’s med-

itation: another section notes that "Today is the 6<sup>th</sup> of September. In six days, Russia will hold a day of conception: couples will be given time off from work to procreate, and those who give birth on Russia's national day will receive money, cars, refrigerators, and other prizes." It could be a random fact, except that nothing in this intricately structured poem is random. Olivia is her friend's daughter rather than her own; we know from this and other poems that the poet herself is childless, that her inability to conceive is much on her mind, that, perhaps like any woman named Mary and raised Catholic, she feels a compelling, ironic kinship with the Virgin. (Another poem called "Update on Mary" begins "Mary always thinks that as soon as she gets a few more things done and finishes the dishes, she will open herself to God.") Details add up: a line about the disappearance of honeybee colonies ("Some blame droughts. Too few flowers, they say: too little nectar") is juxtaposed against a verse from the Book of Luke ("*Consider the ravens. They neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them*") to yield a complex diptych about nature's losers and winners, about want and abundance. Here are the last three sections of the poem:

The men never saw the ravens—just heard their deep *caw*,  
*caw* circling.

Olivia and I look down on Duccio's scene. I point to the  
angel's closed lips; she points to his dark wings.

The blue container of rice milk fits loosely into Olivia's  
hand the same way the book fits into the hands of Duccio's  
Mary. She punches a hole in the top and, until it is empty,  
Olivia drinks.

The narrative closes in a way that seems naturalistic and prophetic simultaneously. The woman in the canyon is saved by "the shaggy-throated ravens," even though earlier she's described as seeing their "unkindness"; in the angel the poet sees an image of silence, while the child sees an icon of flight. The poem works not through argument but through revelation; the images collect, like bits of puffed rice, adding up in the reader's imagination as they may.

In the second half of the book, overt references to the Biblical Annunciation are much less frequent than in the first half. The concentric circles widen: there are poems about touching a statue of Joan of Arc, about taking care of an old woman in a group home, about remembering an art teacher who may have been a pedophile, about swimming in the ocean. And yet, having been conditioned to expect annunciations, we see them everywhere, as for example when a flock of pigeons descending on an ash tree becomes charged with mystery:

Nothing stays long enough to know.  
How long since we've been inside  
                                  anything together the way

                  these birds are inside  
this tree together, shifting, making it into  
                                  a shivering thing?

This obviously reflects the poet's sensibility; what's uncanny is the degree to which it also seems reflective of the *reader's* heightened imagination—as though the process of reading these poems had alerted us to the possibilities of spirit in the world around us.

If I've made *Incarnadine* sound like a book of complacent devotional verse, I've done it a disservice. One of its epigraphs is from Simone Weil: "The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation," and its energies are often restless, dissatisfied, unsettled. Like Botticelli's Mary, the poet is depicted as both turning toward and turning away, and encounters with the unknown seem both transformative and terrifying in equal measure. "Angel of abortion, angel of alchemy, / angels of barrenness and bliss, / exhale closer. Let me feel / your breath on my teeth," she says in one poem. Another, "Holy," contemplates the chasm between the faith of her terminally ill mother and her own spiritual uncertainty: "I do not believe in the beauty of falling. // Over and over in the dark I tell myself / I do not have to believe / in the beauty of falling // though she edges toward you, / saying your name with

such steadiness.” More often, though, the visionary seems to appear in the quietest, most ordinary moments:

There were faint sounds  
like walnuts being dropped by crows onto the street,  
almost a brush  
of windchime from the porch—

Windows around me everywhere half-open—

My skin alive with the pitch.

*David Walker*



## FACT AND FORM, BLOOD AND LOVE

A. Van Jordan, **The Cineaste** (Norton, 2013)

Shane McCrae, **Blood** (Noemi Press, 2013)

The documentary imagination is alive and well in American poetry—particularly in African American poetry, and particularly as that poetry addresses history (though the same impulse has led some “white” poets into similar territory—notably, this year, Tess Taylor, in *A Forage House*). Another tendency, particularly (though again not exclusively) among writers of color, is an inclination not only to use but also to experiment with form. It’s difficult not to think of Marilyn Nelson in both contexts: her 2001 *Carver: A Life in Poems* opened the gates for historical exploration, for herself and others; and her 2005 *A Wreath for Emmett Till* expanded her already large formalist repertoire to include—and as far as I know to introduce into contemporary poetry—the challenging form of the heroic crown of sonnets.

Although A. Van Jordan and Shane McCrae are so stylistically distinctive that it would be impossible to mistake the one for the other, their new books both exhibit both tendencies; indeed, both feature loose variations on the aforementioned heroic crown of sonnets. Both are also—like many documentary-inflected books—not merely collections of poems, but remarkably focused books, the focus to some extent identified by their short titles.

Jordan’s *Cineaste* is clearly the poet himself, who, in the first and third of the book’s three sections, explores 24 films, ranging historically from 1903 to 1999, geographically from America to Europe to Asia, and generically from blaxploitation to art films. The historical range is important: the American films, especially, are a means of exploring some important aspects of our recent (and sometimes racial) history; but Jordan is taking on more than history. Readers will be familiar with some of the films, but most will be introduced to others for the first time, and may be tempted (as I was) to jot down titles for the next Netflix order. Jordan uses a variety of techniques to introduce the films, but the aim is always to take us beneath the surface—to delve, not simply to review or summarize. In the prologue poem,

based on the 1927 silent film *Metropolis*, he places us in the theater with him ("Listening to the organist play feels like eavesdropping / inside the mind of a giant"); more often he enters the film itself, usually as third-person observer and questioner, though a number of the poems are spoken in the first-person voices of characters. There's some merging of character and cineaste: "Call me what you may— / / Nosferatu, Dracula, A. Van," or "Peter Lorre couldn't be here tonight, so I come, / proving a worthy understudy" ("M"); and though "The Mack," begins in a distanced voice, Jordan ends by addressing the characters directly. He also addresses the reader, or audience, or reader-audience-character, often through questions, and occasionally more directly ("If one rainy night you find yourself / leaving a phone booth, and you meet a man..."). Some of the most compelling of these mostly free-verse poems turn on points of repetition ("The Red Shoes," "Do the Right Thing"), and a few use the formal means for which Jordan is well known (a ghazal, a terza rima poem, a sonnet framed on palindromic end-words).

But the formal tour de force, as well as the most ambitious part of the book, is the second section, "The Homesteader," which is also the most overtly historical. On the one hand, it's a sequence of 44 sonnets, the last line of each echoed as the first line of the next, as in any crown of sonnets. Though Jordan's sequence lacks the final sonnet that claims the repeated lines from the previous fourteen, the linking of 44 sonnets in this manner may set some sort of record.

There's also a great deal of innovation within the sonnets themselves, which rhyme variously (couplets, quatrains, etc.), or occasionally not at all. Most striking is the experimental hybridization of forms for which Jordan has become famous: one poem is a blues sonnet, another a terza rima one, and almost half represent a marriage of sonnet and sestina, with repeated end-words replacing rhymes. Sometimes these occur randomly, sometimes in palindromic manner, as in the sonnet I will quote in a moment.

But just as impressive as the formal innovation, and clearly related to it, is the cinematic structure of "The Homesteader." The sonnets are variously labeled *Ext.*, *Int.*, and *Montage*, with settings and dates noted; all are persona poems, most delivered by identified

speakers. More importantly, there's a complex narrative arc—lightly divided, almost classically, into five sections—which, with the aid of the repeated lines, invites collage and juxtaposition.

The primary speaker is Oscar Micheaux, African American filmmaker, who is one of two primary elements of the collage, the other being Leo Frank, a Jew falsely convicted of rape and lynched in Georgia in 1913. We first meet Micheaux in 1902, when he learns about homesteading from someone on a train and decides to go to South Dakota "to find, own and be / My future"; the rest of the poem traces his journey from farm to film, until 1919, when his first movie, which gives the poem its title, is produced. Though no copy of *The Homesteader* exists, and though Micheaux went on to make almost 40 more films, the focus remains on this period of his life, in which he finds his vocation—which is also the period in which Leo Frank brutally loses his life.

In the first section of the poem, Micheaux's and Frank's stories are juxtaposed, with no apparent connection. But Jordan notes that Frank was one of Micheaux's obsessions, and in the middle section he allows Micheaux not only to observe the arrival of Frank's coffin in New York, but also to be inspired by this event: in the next sonnet, he says "I need / To stop dreaming, start having influence // On lives, not just Negroes but whites too."

The juxtaposition of "not just Negroes but whites too" is one of the tasks Jordan takes on here, bravely making his lynching victim a white man. Peripheral characters from both stories, as well as other contemporary references to film (including *The Birth of a Nation* and the movie theater balcony where African Americans were obliged to sit), provide both context and complexity. Though race is central throughout, a couplet defines Micheaux's dual concerns in the first part of the poem: "So few / chances in this world to share a twin bill: / One's love to find, one's calling to fulfill." Love turns out to be elusive, losing out to work; but its place in the poem allows for some bold juxtapositions, as, in successive sonnets, Frank ruminates on his wife and Micheaux on the death of his former wife—or as, even more audaciously, both a love scene from *The Birth of a Nation* and the rape that led to Frank's lynching appear in close proximity (linked by the repeated lines) to Micheaux's contemplated need for love.



Complex as these interactions are—and one of the pleasures of the poem is discovering more of them upon each reading—it's the reflections of Micheaux, and the poetry that contains them, that are perhaps the poem's most compelling pleasure for me. The second and fourth sections are more tightly "linked" than the others; each contains seven sonnets, all spoken by Micheaux. Here is one, which illustrates the palindrome/sestina/sonnet form, and also provides a kind of commentary on Jordan's own aesthetic enterprise:

Sharpen the focus in your lens, and you  
Sharpen your view of the world; you can see  
How people inhabit space in their lives,  
How the skin of Negroes and whites both play  
With light, how both reflect form within—light.  
How often does one stop to notice this  
In the course of one's day? How often do  
We think of what our shadows and light do  
Together in a space in the world? This  
Alone would slow down a day, watching light.  
This alone would invite one out to play.  
This alone would allow, into your life,  
Others. But, no, in life one rarely sees  
How light bounces off someone back to you.

With his careful lens turned on "others," including both "Negroes and whites," Jordan sheds disturbing but radiant light on the complexities of our complex twentieth-century history and our current human lives.

Shane McCrae's *Blood* is similarly interested in complex connections between black and white; but as the title suggests, his book goes—and cuts—much deeper than skin. Similarly haunting in style and intensity to his breathtakingly original first book, this second one turns his earlier subject matter inside out and takes us on an historical journey that becomes personal only near the end. *Blood* is organized chronologically: bookended with poems focusing on an 1811 slave revolt, the book moves, in its five middle sections, from slavery to the present. The "blood" of the title is foregrounded in the pull-no-

punches violence that is central to most of the historical parts of the book: much blood is spilled, as in the first poem, where one of the slaves describes those who revolted as

men in blood the blood  
inside our bodies and the blood the dried  
Spray of the blood of the white men we  
killed in the night     / And the black skin between

But McCrae is also interested in blood as both a (false) indicator of race and a (complex) indicator of relationship, as in blood lines—especially when those “lines,” white and black, are (in more ways than one) crossed.

The first and fifth sections of the book explore this complexity most explicitly, focusing respectively on a slave mother’s killing of her daughter (the incident that inspired Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*) and the poet’s racially complex relationship with his half brother; the third section is similarly long and almost as connected, and the intervening sections are short poems that also explore issues of identity. Underlying this architecture is more than a hint of sonnet sequence. The poems in the long sections range from 9 to 23 lines, over half falling in the 14-17 range, and the fifth section is a loose version of a heroic crown of sonnets, its fourteen sections linked by repeated lines (though, as in *Jordan*, there is no sonnet to draw the lines together). McCrae’s first book included a number of loosely rhyming sonnets, and while the balance of form and wildly experimental style that gave that book its identity is tipped in the latter direction here, a few of the fourteen-line poems retain a loose rhyme scheme, and the ghost of the sonnet (as well as of iambic pentameter) both haunts and integrates this boldly original book.

Here, illustrating both the style and the ghost of form, is the first of the twelve poems that make up the first sequence, all of which are spoken by the slave Margaret Garner:

My first thought was     *My baby’s sick* / Wasn’t a thought  
really but that’s what all that blood / Felt like  
but all that blood  
Really but all that blood     felt like my Mary getting / Sick on my hand

Wasn't a thought my first thought    was I wasn't / Was    I hadn't but I couldn't stop  
After the first  
Cut I couldn't stop  
because it hurt

I couldn't stop / Hurting her because it hurt    I had to cut her head / All the way off  
The marshals came with the Master  
I wasn't  
Thinking about mercy or love

Before that night    I never had the chance to love    / Anyone  
she was the first    person I loved

The stammerings, fragmentations, repetitions, oddly placed capitalizations, and unexpected mid-line breaks (marked by space or /) create a halting and haunting style that McCrae uses to some extent in most of his poems. But it seems especially appropriate for exploring the racial complexities that define Margaret (whose father was white and all but one of whose children were fathered by her white master), as well as the resulting tension between violence and love. The halting style allows for self-correction, as in the first line above, but also, through its syntactic back-stitchings, for obsessive repetitions ("...Felt like / but all that blood / Really but all that blood    felt like") and some plunges toward incoherence ("Wasn't a thought my first thought    was I wasn't / Was    I hadn't but I couldn't stop"). The stylistic turbulence is countered not only by the lyric beauty of the style, but also by the formal inclination of this 14-line poem that includes some end-rhyming (*stop/first/stop/hurt* in the second quatrain, *Anyone / loved* in the final couplet).

All of the poems in the third section of the book (five based on former slaves' memories of the Civil War as recorded by the Federal Writers Project, five based on accounts of post-Civil War lynchings) seem somewhat closer to their documentary sources, though it's hard to know without checking. Certainly there is less internal turmoil in these poems; but repetitions, rhymes, concluding lines that pack a wallop through striking image or disguised rhyme ("...the Yankees were / Shaking hands    calling them Dinah    Sarah    Sam") put McCrae's poetic stamp on them.

The final sequence, following a short Writers Project-inspired poem that focuses on a former slave's son with "skin / As white as



any white boy's skin," returns to the emotional complexity of the first sequence. Apparently autobiographical, the sequence is titled "Brother," and focuses on (as one title has it) "The One Whose Mother was Black and the One Whose Mother Was White"—a reversal of the situation in the first sequence, where the children of the slave woman have differently-raced fathers. Though the sequence fills in the "story" in light touches (the speaker, we learn, did not know his brother—or their father—until the boys were adolescents), the trajectory is more emotional than narrative. The sequence begins with characteristically fractured syntax and repetition, creating emotional confusion and intensity ("Brother is we is each of us we ghosts / Brother of white folks we / don't never known us brother we / Because we never doesn't fits / Nowhere we brother / doesn't fit in bodies"), and the pattern continues throughout. Though the style embraces both "standard" and "black" English, most obviously in a nearly-repeated line that links two sections ("If we was given our whole lives" becomes "If we were given our whole lives"), the language is usually so fused and altered from normal usage that it's impossible to separate one linguistic strain from another. Nor are the emotional strains easily separable: love is a central theme, but it's always complex ("Brother you are made strange by love"; "I do not have a father and I love him"). And while blood assumes its familial sense throughout the sequence, its final poem, a "Coda," references a violent scene, apparently inspired by the interracial relationship that produced the speaker. The section ends with this:

And blood sprayed from the artery  
A rose  
like if the Lord had stopped  
making in the middle of mak-  
ing red  
roses

and never made their boundaries

That such a violent incident and image can become the source of such a gorgeously apt and startling metaphor is one of the many miracles

of Shane McCrae's *Blood*—and also, in its different way, of A. Van Jordan's *The Cineaste*. For both of these books, violence and love are inseparable; for both, the lens of poetry makes audacious beauty of our most terrible histories.

*Martha Collins*



## GOD IS NO SECURITY BLANKET

Mark Wunderlich, *The Earth Avails* (Graywolf Press, 2014)

One of my favorite “Peanuts” cartoons opens with a baseball game being rained out. As Charlie Brown and all the players run for cover, Linus van Pelt shakes his fist at the black-streaked sky in impotent rage, screaming “Rain, rain go away, come again another day!” When the sky promptly clears, Linus races for home, slamming the door shut and wailing to his bewildered sister Lucy, “HIDE ME!”

Though Mark Wunderlich proclaims himself an atheist, his poems are colored with spiritual alarm. He talks in a process note to one of the poems in this book about giving himself permission to “write a book of prayers to a God I don’t believe in.” He wants to draw out that aspect of prayer as utilitarian, adapted to specific situations of daily life. But how is it that he encounters the God he addresses, even as he disbelieves? Early in the pages of the book he calls on the “Unreadable One,” and refers to a buck in the distance as an “absence” and as “animal erasure.”

What is it that gets erased when a living creature inhabits the landscape? One is tempted to say Wunderlich’s outlook is “pastoral,” but if it is then it eschews the older romantic sense of “pastoral” and moves closer to Joyelle McSweeney’s sense of the “necropastoral”—a pastoral that includes death at its edges, that acknowledges and draws in environmental destruction and degradation wrought by human interaction with a “natural world” that is anything but pristine. In fact, the one time the word “pastoral” is used in the book, it is used to describe the way an animal who has just been struck looks at the human who struck him.

A long poem called “Driftless Elegy” looks at what vanishes from a small town as the years go by. After cataloging the animals which have disappeared from the landscape—sheep, badgers, milk cows—the poet invokes the missing people:

Who will remember the lodge hall and the good times had there?  
Who will remember the handshake for the Rebeccas?

Eventually the people are not generic but named—Hilbert, Mutz, Chester, Babe Schwark, Bootie Schmidt, Piggy—and the feeling of desolation in the Midwestern town feels palpable and specific. Though Wunderlich acknowledges “I am the end of a genetic line—a family dies with me,” he admits “This is hardly a tragedy. We are not an impressive group.”

In fact, what he remembers most about the town is an earlier destruction: he has a photograph of a crowd of people watching a section of the town going up in flames, what he calls a “premonition” of the final disintegration of the town in the present day. He fixates on one figure in the photograph, a “blur of girl” who “rushes away like a ghost. No face. Hardly a form.” And though “no one is alive who knows her name,” it feels like the poet, who marginalizes himself in his own book, seems to take her as a totem.

In a conversation with Alex Dimitrov, Wunderlich said this about the question of marginalization as it related to queer identity and poetics: “For me, being a homo has always been about occupying the margins, creating and imagining alternatives to that which is culturally dominant. Marriage and the military? Seriously? We can’t come up with anything better than that?”

For Wunderlich, exploring queer desire has always been about seeing it *as* marginal, inhabiting spaces away from the hetero-normalizing influences of current LGBTQ mainstream discourse. Early examples of this include his poems “The Trick” and “This Heat, These Human Forms” from his first book, *The Anchorage*, and the fantastic “It’s Your Turn to Do the Milking, My Father Said” and “Letter to J.” from his second, *Voluntary Servitude*, which juxtaposes scenes from a rural upbringing on a farm with scenes from various gay fetish subcultures.

In a poem from *The Earth Avails* called “Prayer for a Journey by Sea,” Wunderlich calls the space between God and the supplicant a “pitiless distance.” God appears nearly as a lover here, with “bearded cheek” and eyes of “dark soil.” Later the poet declares, “I am your little ram,” acknowledging that:

the day will come for you to draw  
the bright sickle of the moon

across my wooly throat.

Man and animal switch places often in this book, in fact. They are both ravenous things, both "animals" really, the humans often being called "sow" or "filth," and the animals given both human qualities—a raccoon is called "clever"—and defining other beings and objects—one animal is likened to a deer, a fire is likened to a bear. Both humans and animals have paws; sometimes the animal ones are more violent and capricious, sometimes the human ones feel more "animal."

Wunderlich, as in both of his previous books, has a fantastic command of the mechanics of a poem—line, couplet, stanza, the architecture of the poem entire. He is enamored of the combination that quick and slow syllables offer each other, as in this short excerpt from "Lent":

The cardinal sweet-sang  
to the enlongated day

from behind his night-black mask.  
The woods graying still,

a forest of beams. Cold tamps sap  
back down the taproot.

The titmouse pips a seed hull.  
The cherry swells a node

of red and the hive stokes  
the chip of sun that is their queen.

Late in the book there is a moment where the human—the poet as a young boy—buries his hand in the fur of a dead albino deer's neck. He feels his hand

pink and small...

crackling with static  
and coming to life with the electric surge

that animates all things.

But rather than continuing its natural life—which would mean decay into the earth—the carcass is preserved and mounted in a glass case in the bank where the local school’s art teacher has painstakingly painted a backdrop of the buck’s “natural” habitat in a “fussy hand.”

This life of the body past its own life is termed a “perpetual imitation,” one that is falsier than the life of the animal in the written document of the poem. But the “prayers” are always directed to humans trying to understand their condition better. God, lower-cased mostly in both noun and pronoun, is mere excuse. “I have loved my self and the world more than I have loved you,” says Wunderlich to god, “with your unknowable face in the firmament // and the world ripe with detail.” Later still, god becomes the “Maddening Abstraction,” “the Triangulator,” the “Great Confusor.”

Says Wunderlich, later in his conversation with Dimitrov, “I think at the core of this book is my own deep distress about the state of our natural world and a sense of our daily culpability in its degradation, but also how it’s probably too late for us to reverse the effects that are causing rapid changes in global temperatures. Human beings have changed the world by polluting it, and there is just too much money in oil which is at the core of the entire economic engine of the world.”

It takes a poet with bravery, clear vision, and intense technical skill to shake his fist at god and mean it, to shout into the detailed rained-out world and not flinch.

*Kazim Ali*



## "HERE IS A HAPPINESS"

Donald Revell, *Tantivy* (Alice James Books, 2012)

For the past few years, everywhere I've traveled, I've taken Donald Revell's *The Bitter Withy* along. The book has been to Glen Lake, Michigan, and Oahu; to Charlottesville and Palm Springs; to Boston and Yosemite. I admit: sometimes I almost don't take the book. Then, I think: *what if I need to know something that only Donald Revell and The Bitter Withy can tell me?* It's happened so many times already. I have no reason to doubt it'll happen again.

\*

When you grow tired enough, only the truth will do. Fortunately, the truth is good news. Finally getting down to the real business of growing up, I had an inkling this was the case; Donald Revell confirmed it for me. In *Invisible Green: Selected Prose*, in *The Bitter Withy*, in *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye*, and, now, in *Tantivy*: "If there were a peril to run from I would run" (4).

\*

A great poem meets you wherever you are ready. This morning, "Pure" meets me. The speaker is awake with knowledge: "I could not sleep last night for thinking / Mountain and stricken inside your heart / A tree." The intimacy of this poem makes me believe: someone is waiting up, attentive, on my behalf. Aloneness is not so alone, after all.

\*

A true poem is unparaphrasable, itself already a translation of our wordless yearnings. I often think this is why some professors carry a fear of poetry. Even those who teach it, regularly. That is, they teach it frequently and in the regular way with the regular insistence. Revell offers an alternate, more companionable pedagogy in *Invisible*

*Green*: "A poem is something to do in the meantime—not a pastime, but as an active preparation (parable of the wise and foolish virgins e.g.) as you and I await Horizon's homecoming. Poetry is horizon, of course, a godly site underway, and a true friend at sundown and in the morning. Prepared in a good and alive heart, the poem may speed Horizon just a little or stride to meet it on its way." The poems in *Tantivy* have been prepared in just such a heart. They stride, speeding Horizon for themselves, and for us, too. Here is a "'A line of hills....,'" which begins with gentle noticing:

A line of hills  
Then a line of hills where the grass ends  
And heat travels through the trees  
Into a happiness  
Akin to the great happiness of imaginary children  
Whitens to the sky

How wonderful and final  
My life becomes  
The grit of the deathbed earth grows soft  
A flights of swifts  
Lifts an agate meadow to the sky

Kittenish alpine blown-apart dandelion  
I have caught sight of my true friend  
Rounding the hillside in his cloak of rain

A typical poem. For Revell, that is, not for contemporary poetry, which is not nearly so often unarmed, or disarming. I appreciate the clarity here, the depth of noticing, the willingness. My heart aches, not my mind; cleverness does not plague this poem.

And each line is indeed a line. Unto itself. Lift any one out. It's still lovely, meaningful. No helper lines here. Or, they're all helpers, to us; their individual completion makes them so.

What is the proper subject matter? Everything you see and everything you don't, says Charles Wright. This poem begins in one seeing and moves to another. All along the way, there's nothing wrong.

One can speak of the work of "kittenish" or of "t" and "k" or of like sounds throughout. Craft at this level—which is to say, deep craft, craft plus... —adds up to more/other than what all those poetry handbooks we've cast aside can explain. Revell does not use any word we do not know; he does not make any move we've not been taught. And yet—

Between an assignment and a poem, there is an interlude where no teacher or textbook can go. This interlude is private; a self shows up there; sometimes a poem happens. The best poems emerge from and reveal this space and entice us to spend more time there.

My favorite word in this poem, the one that most lures me in, is "into" at the start of a line. Like all prepositions, "into" tells about a relationship. In this case, with a supposed abstraction. Dickinson too writes this way: the abstractions do the work of image. Here, happiness.

Metaphor arises from need. No need: no need for metaphor. If you can say it literally, I always tell my students, you might as well. The actual world, in all its fleetingness, is a thing to love, not replace. What I love about Revell's work is how he takes us right to the edge of the actual, and then enters the metaphoric, out of necessity. So, gentle noticing to start, and then that yields to something else. Looking up and out, and metaphorically also— Everything seen and not seen. And then, and this is Revell's particular gift, the story that is decided upon (we are forever deciding upon our stories) is one of gratitude, that other necessity. That's what this poem knows, its unique offering. No tantrums of sadness here. No retreat into uncertainty. Gratitude for the "true friend." Gratitude *as* the true friend. This is the continual gift of Revell's work.

\*

At home, I keep *The Bitter Withy* and *Tantivy* on my bedside table, along with other spiritual reading. These are resurrection books. Not there and then, but here and now. "I did not think the end would fall in the middle way / But I am happy now / That now is the hour / Even burrowing animals become creatures of the air." The Kingdom of Heaven is within, the hour is near, stay awake, etc.

\*

Whatever crises of faith run tantivy through *Tantivy*, they are still of *faith*, of that I have no doubt: "The shadows of the leaves are addressed to immortality."

\*

The most mysterious poems—that is, the ones that endure—are often very clear—strikingly, or bracingly, or lovingly so—save for our resistance that they be otherwise.

\*

I've walked alongside these poems so long now I begin to understand how to be fine in the passing world. "Here is a happiness with nothing underneath."

\*

Our most recent trip, *Tantivy's* and mine, was to the Midwest Modern Language Association conference. I began this essay on the airplane: a kind poem makes a space; delight, and recognition; we are not here forever; love poems and elegies; the afterlife; knowing, and rejoicing anyway; childhood, then and now; the personal but not—; "Birds... are physicians to us..."; God with a capital G.

What makes a book resonate?



In the hotel elevator, I overheard someone say, "Every space between earth and God is occupied." By what or whom I wasn't privy to and how we are to feel I don't know, but I was on my way back to my room and *Tantivy* was waiting. I knew to look for the answer there.

*Mary Ann Samyn*

## HOLY SONGS PRESENTED ON CHIPPED PLATES

Jennifer Atkinson, **Canticle of the Night Path** (Parlor Press, 2013)

With lyrical fluency reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins', with diction and anaphora reminiscent of the New Testament, with dignity of tone and breathtaking delicacy of image, the poems in Jennifer Atkinson's fourth collection quickly establish a quiet authority and sustain it with remarkable consistency.

From "Canticle of A" to "Canticle of Zed," alphabetical order is the first level of organization, along with a rough chronology ("Canticle of Before" appears on page 5 and "Canticle of the Wolf," on page 58, tells us that this is "the last wolf"). Beneath such obvious markers, the poems cohere deeply around elements of natural and personal history. The "personal" here is not attached to a particular, recurring speaker; what recur, in the few poems inhabited by an *I* as well as the many speakerless poems, are instead elements of human experience—death, love, happiness, breath, praise—with which all readers can connect.

Of these 57 holy songs, five (all subtitled "from *The Parable of Mary Magdalene*") are inspired by fragments of ancient papyrus manuscripts discovered buried in a farmer's field near Nag Hammadi, Egypt; seven more poems name her in titles, including "Canticle for Magdalene's Outcast Demons" and "Canticle of Magdalene and the Lamp." Invocation of the ancient manuscripts, which date to the third and fourth centuries, gives the book a religious aura but not a conventional one: controversy has surrounded the figure of Mary Magdalene for two thousand years. Was she a minor figure in Jesus' life, or a prostitute, reformed or otherwise? Was she, as the Gnostic manuscript suggests, an apostle—one favored, in fact, by Jesus?

A feminine presence abounds, beyond that of Mary Magdalene: the last wolf is female, as is the crow in "Canticle of the Crow"; ten girls inhabit "Canticle of the Bridegroom," and St. Martha, "former kitchenmaid, sister of Lazarus the former corpse," slays her dragon and becomes saint and "savior of Provence." Two poems mid-book are addressed, separately, to the Italian poets Montale and Leopardi, but otherwise men appear infrequently, and then usually in titles—

two name Francis, another names Giotto (but the full title is "Canticle for Giotto's Magdalene"). One poem addresses a "brother."

There are many sorts of brothers, of course, and on a later reading I discovered from the notes that this poem is "for Gerard Manley Hopkins [and] borrows language from several of his poems." In fact, the notes dedicate six other poems to French and Italian male poets. "Canticle after Francis" begins "For sister sun... For brother moon...", reversing the usual association of moon and women. Perhaps this is a clue to why so many men populate the notes: women thrive in the full light of these poems, men in the penumbra of the poet's remembered reading experiences.

All of the poems in *Canticle of the Night Path* are in units of five—lines, stanzas or paragraphs—summoning the familiar pentacle star of Christianity. The book includes a few loose ghazals, some poems in single lines and couplets, and prose poems. None of the forms calls attention to itself; they are as transparent as the occasional speaker.

The Biblical tone of the book is supported by imagery and diction, with frequent mention of olive trees, almond groves, orchards, honey, bread, shepherds, angels and flames. The tone, however, is not moralistic, dogmatic, or overly abstract. The authority is poetic, not religious: abstractions that do appear are imbedded in imagery that is original and compellingly accurate. "Body ash," for instance, is described in "Canticle of Dust" as "like beach sand but rougher." Sometimes images are arresting, like "light-stung," or unrolling ferns described as "infant fists." Other images have a word-play quality that rewards multiple readings, as in the opening line of "Canticle of the White Rose": "The lantern's shadow returns to the globe." I first see the light from a lamp collapsing as it's turned off; then the other globe, the larger one, receives the shadow. The next stanza supports that reading: "In the vineyards, summer's opaque clusters draw down the sun, / crush daylight down to sugar." *Crush* and *sugar*: *draw down*, *daylight down*: here's music and matter, idea and image, presented not on ecclesiastical silver platters but (from a poem title) on "chipped plates."

The central stanza in "Canticle of the Lavender Fields" contains a similarly playful image: "Monks' sung chants—unsequestered—brim over the sills / And spill out to water the dry lavender." Surely

cups running over their brims merge with window-sills to make a double-take image, at the same time alluding to the Lord's Prayer. There's a light touch of irony in the contrast of "unsequestered" songs (such as the Canticles) free to roam the fields of praise while the monks, their makers, are not.

Another example of skillfully handled imagery comes from "Canticle of Stone." The line "A glossary of mattes and glints, sift and flow, clench and thaw" rings beautifully in the ear and mind, with the *gloss* in *glossary* ricocheting off *mattes* and joining company with *glints*, so that the light hidden within stone leaves hints visible at the surface. Finally, the first stanza of "Canticle of Prayer Beads," besides being a strong set of images in itself, could be a description of the book:

A mumbled bracelet, a cut-glass grammar of charms  
Pierced through and linked in a sequence of rhymes.

Though the tone of *Canticle of the Night Path* is often serious, it is not infrequently leavened with humor and affection. "Oh, Leopardi, you sad sack, buck up!" begins "Canticle with Macaroons," a title which in itself makes me smile; and in "Canticle of the Day Path" the speaker chides herself for abandoning large pleasures (the bells, the light, the day) for small:

I rouse myself from bed for a walk before breakfast. Look, I say.  
Listen.

Wild pears are blooming on the roadside. The stone mason's  
chisel isn't chink-chinking.

But I refuse not to sulk, refuse to meet the quiet halfway, to want  
more or less than coffee.

The road winds up the hill toward pealing bells, the polished  
copper light.

But coffee, hot milk! What could be better than coffee with bread  
and cold butter?



Or perhaps it is that the small pleasures become large. That closing question is rhetorical, after all. The joys of the body, the joys of our greater body the earth—nothing could be better.

The five Mary Magdalene “parable” poems start with “It is like....” The *it* easily attaches to the longer of the book’s two epigraphs, from *The Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]*:

. . .I said to him, ‘Teacher, now does one who sees the vision see it <through> the soul <or> through the spirit? The Teacher answered and said, ‘One does not see through the soul nor through the spirit, but the mind which [is] between the two—that is [what] sees the vision and it is [...]

“It is like a single cherry tree. . . .” “It is like the widow who couldn’t remember. . . .” “It is like a child asleep outside in her basket. . . .” Vision—literal, metaphoric, spiritual—is what the book pursues. And captures on nearly every page.

To give a sense of the momentum each poem builds with sound, image, and vision, I’d like to quote another poem in its entirety. Here’s “Canticle of Slippage”:

She would like to rest just under the rained-on, distressed as-if-  
on-purpose surface,  
Irrelevant sounds quenched, light at a remove,  
  
Time, like silt, suspended.

The sensation of dissolution, or is it absorption, into the water.  
Gradually quiet quiets the banter, displaces the constant squabble,

The shilly-shall-I, will-I-won’t-I nettlesome dither.

Such relief in surrender to prayer, tipping down  
Slow through gradations of dark and still darker blue.

Small repetitions and near-repetitions make for a mantra-like quality (“rest just,” “quiet quiets,” “shilly-shall-I,” “dark and . . . darker”):

the alternation between couplets and single-line stanzas suggests a hypnotic, rocking motion. The hushed tone of the poem is supported by the recurring sounds: not one line lacks a word with an initial *s* or *sh*; three lines have two. This is not a description of meditation—it's an enactment.

"And what do you do after that?" a poem asks ("Canticle with Secret"). And answers: "The next thing, dear heart, and the next."

*Pamela Alexander*

## "I SIMPLY CAME BACK TO WORK"

Pablo Neruda, **All the Odes**, edited by Ilan Stavans (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013)

Sometimes, excess must be welcomed and embraced. Here is a book of 225 poems in Spanish and English, with eighteen different translators. Despite the fact that Neruda's odes are slender, typically one to four words per line, so that the two languages can run side by side on the page, the result is a book of 863 pages, a regular door-stop of an object, a monster among poetry books, but one that just happens to be brimming with life and energy and discovery.

There are any number of ways to cope with a book of such size and generosity. One could read an ode a day for most of a year, then start over. Or one could binge and read twenty, thirty, forty odes at a time. If one is a poet, one could read an ode, write a response, read another, etc. They make you feel like a poet and their democratic spirit is inclusionary; Neruda welcomes you to his territory and methodology. The more odes the better, seems to be his motto.

This was a poet who straddled romanticism and modernism, merging them and living happily with both. The romantics loved the ode because it implied celebration and lyrical musicality, in a high style, as it had in its Greek and Roman origins. But modernism could choose to turn the music into something like jazz—casual, improvisatory, and populist. And Neruda epitomized that side of the modernist spirit, not so much the erudite opacity of Eliot and Pound, but more the tradition of breaking with formality and elitism, the modernism of Whitman and Williams and, yes, Stevens. He was playful, he broke rules, and he wrote for popular consumption.

Indeed, these odes owe their existence in great part to a deal that Neruda made with a Venezuelan newspaper: he would supply one ode a week if they would be printed in the news section rather than on the arts pages. This commitment cranked up an already substantial output and allowed him to explore the fullest possibilities of subject. It was not so much the question of what an ode could celebrate, more a sense of there being nothing it could not.

That was the first thing I learned about Neruda's odes: that they praised mundane things like socks and shoelaces, as if to demonstrate that poetry was anywhere and everywhere. But the truth about them is even more spectacular than the deliberate celebration of the ordinary, of spoons and eggs and bicycles; it's that their range is so spectacular and unpredictable. I open *All the Odes* at random and come to #96, "Oda para planchar" / "Ode to Ironing":

Poetry is white:  
it comes from water swathed in drops,  
it wrinkles and gathers,  
this planet's skin has to spread out,  
the sea's whiteness has to be ironed out,  
and the hands keep moving,  
the sacred surfaces get smoothed,  
and things are done this way:  
the hands make the world every day,  
fire conjoins with steel,  
linen, canvas and cotton arrive  
from the scuffles in the laundries,  
and from light a dove is born:  
chastity returns out of the foam.

(tr. Stavans)

As it happens, this is one of the shortest odes. Its association of the mundane task of ironing with other human labor and with large natural processes is a typical Nerudan strategy. That it accomplishes it so briskly is unusual, as are the longer lines. More characteristic of length and movement is #98, "Oda a Jean Arthur Rimbaud," / "Ode to Jean Arthur Rimbaud," which opens this way:

Now,  
this October  
you will turn  
a hundred,  
harrowing friend.  
May I speak to you?



I'm alone,  
through my window  
the Pacific breaks  
its eternal threatening thunder.

It is night.

The burning firewood casts  
a fugitive ray  
on the oval  
of your old portrait . . .

There's something almost Cubist about the fragmenting effect of breaking sentences down into component particles of one or two or three words. There is also something meditative about the pace. We can move quickly but we are obviously being invited to slow down and let the poem happen gradually. It will go on for four more pages and eventually reach 160 lines, though "line" seems an odd term for these tumbling bits of discourse. As the poem develops, Neruda expresses great sympathy for Rimbaud's suffering and tries to envision a better existence for him ("I invite you to America, / to our rivers, / to the breath of the moon / over the cordillera"), ending this way:

Today it's simpler, we are  
countries, we're  
people,  
guaranteeing  
the growth of poetry,  
the distribution of bread, the patrimony  
of oblivion. Now  
you would not be  
alone.

(tr. Stavans)

I'm not sure what the patrimony of oblivion ("el patrimonio / del olvidado") is, but I like the way Neruda fashions a sort of lullaby of

friendship for the poet born a hundred years earlier, connecting his own modernism with Rimbaud's anticipation of it.

The reason that the ironing poem and the Rimbaud poem are close together in this collection has nothing to do with the chronology of their composition. (The four primary collections of Neruda's odes were published in the years 1954-1959.) Stavans, following a lead of Neruda's, has elected to order the poems alphabetically (by their English titles, in this case I and J). Thus an ode from the thirties may sit next to one from the fifties. The notes at the back date some of them, but not all. In the case of Rimbaud, the fact of the hundredth birthday tells us it belongs to 1954.

The alphabetical organization leads to some interesting, if random, conjunctions. The E's, for example, bring us odes to the Earth, the Elephant, Enchanted Light, Energy, Envy, Erosion in Malleco Province, Everyone, and the Eye. The two Earth odes are ecstatic love poems, the first translated by Margaret Sayers Peden, the second by Stavans. Stavans also handles the elephant ode, which is full of memories from Neruda's time in Sri Lanka and, in addition to celebrating the animal's majesty, is rueful about circuses and captivity. The poet revisits a painful memory from Ceylon and, retrospectively, uses his ode to restore a freedom he could not confer at the time:

That's why I invoke your gaze today,  
elephant  
lost between the hard stakes  
and the leaves.  
In your honor, pristine beast,  
I lift the collar  
of my ode  
so you may walk  
through the world again.

It's making something that was wrong into a right, the same kind of restorative gesture as in the Rimbaud poem.

The next poem, "Ode to Enchanted Light" (la luz encantada) turns out to be unusually brief and to be translated by Mark Strand:

The light under the trees,  
the light from high heaven.  
The green  
arbor  
light  
that flashes  
in the leaf  
and falls like fresh  
white sand.

A grasshopper lifts  
its sawing sound  
over the clearness.

The world  
is a full glass  
of water.

The elephant and the enchanted light are a perfectly accidental conjunction, but one that I think would have pleased Neruda.

The distribution of translators, not surprisingly, is uneven. Strand has three (the other two being the famous pair of socks ode and "Ode to the Smell of Firewood"); Merwin has three; William Carlos Williams has one ("Laziness"); and Philip Levine has one ("Ode to Salt"). Meanwhile, Stavans has done over half of them (129 by my count) and Margaret Sayers Peden has 42, while Ken Krabbenhoft (who has published two fine collections, *Odes to Common Things* and *Odes to Opposites*) has 21. The translations are consistently excellent. Stavans has a good ear (see "pristine beast," above) and a deep respect for Neruda's rhythms and syntax. Some readers may wish he had made room for Robert Bly, who was bringing us good Neruda translations back in the sixties. But this is Stavans' show and he deserves to be celebrated for his hard work and careful translating. Neruda would probably have written an ode to him.

The collection opens and closes with framing poems. The initial one, "The Invisible Man" (El hombre invisible), Neruda thought of quite rightly as a poem ushering readers over his threshold. Its

speaker wants to associate with all other poets and to have poetry in turn associate itself with the whole world. He feels that he becomes invisible, transcending egotism, by singing for and with all of humanity. As usual with Neruda, we are reminded of his bond with Whitman and Whitman's poetics of democracy.

The closing poem, "The House of Odes" (La casa de las odas), looks back on the poet's tremendous accomplishment with characteristic modesty:

I want everything  
to have  
a handle,  
everything to be  
cup or tool.  
I want people to enter the hardware store  
through the door of my odes.

I work  
by cutting  
fresh boards,  
accumulating honey  
in kegs,  
arranging  
horseshoes, armor,  
forks:  
let everyone come in,  
let them ask,  
let them request whatever they want . . .

I didn't stay seated  
in any dream.  
I simply came back to work  
along with everyone else  
and for everyone.

So that everyone may live  
in it

I make my house  
with see-through  
odes.

(tr. Stavans)

An invisible man in a see-through house? Yes, but also a vivid self-portrait of a distinctive artist. Visit his hardware store, sit on a keg of honey, examine a horseshoe or a fork. You won't be sorry!

*David Young*



## CONTRIBUTORS

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KARL KROLOW (1915-1999) is one of the giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century German poetry, who published more than 3000 poems. STUART FRIEBERT will publish a third collection of Krolow translations with Bitter Oleander Press in 2015 entitled **Puppets in the Wind: Selected Poems of Karl Krolow**.

LARRY LEVIS (1946-1996) published five collections of poetry during his lifetime. **Elegy**, a posthumous volume edited by Philip Levine, appeared in 1997, and Levis' **Selected Poems**, edited by David St. John, was published in 2000. The poem in this issue will appear in Levis' **The Darkening Trapeze: Last Poems**, edited by David St. John and published by Graywolf in 2015.

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MARY ANN SAMYN's most recent collection, **My Life in Heaven**, won the 2012 FIELD Poetry Prize. She directs the MFA program at West Virginia University.

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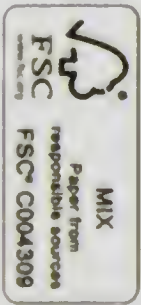
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GENESIS



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